CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND TODAY:

Proud of the past, Looking to the Future

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In our world, a fundamental issue for Catholic Higher Education, and for all Catholic education, is the challenge of relating to an educational culture, and indeed to a general culture, which is in many respects heavily secularised. There is a strain of academic thought which would recognise no place at all for religion in the scheme of education, just as there is a support for, and worse still an unreflective acceptance of, an attitude that would exclude any role for faith in areas such as politics or economics. Professor Richard Dawkins offers perhaps the most extreme expression of this approach:

> "…. I think a case can be made that *faith* is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate"[1].

I do not want to appear paranoid! I begin with this thought because I believe that is possible to bridge what seems to be a great gap between what we would call faith and culture. I have argued in another context that we should not begin by assuming a conflict between religion and the secular. The secular, after all, is the world that God loved so much.

> "The conflict is not between religion and the secular but between the searchers for deeper meaning and those who believe that human life has no meaning beyond what can be measured, analysed and scientifically proved".[2]

The Christian faith tradition itself from very early in its history was shaped in the context of a marriage between two apparently incompatible partners – a faith tradition which grew in a Semitic soil and the civilization that came from Greece and Rome. Early European monk-scholars made a sometimes uneasy but nonetheless very fruitful accommodation with the classical learning of Rome.

PROUD OF ITS PAST

The history of Catholic higher education in Ireland also begins through interaction and mutual enrichment between different cultures -- the Irish pagan tradition and the new faith brought by Patrick.

In the fifth and sixth centuries monks, who had been formed in that tradition of the European monasteries, gradually overcame their unwillingness to engage with pagan, Gaelic culture which they initially saw as dangerous and heathen. In the end they developed the skill of writing in Irish and made it possible to create a written tradition in Irish. They built on the culture that already existed:

> "Since the clergy and the monks displaced and succeeded the druids as the 'philosophers and theologians' of the nation, it was taken for granted that they should devote themselves to study. Thus in the lives of all the sixth-century saints the learning of letters is mentioned as a matter of course"[3].

They became scholars both in the field of faith and in the field of classical literature:

> "An examination of Columban's works shows reminiscences of Persius, Vergil, Horace, Sallust, Ovid, Juvenal and of the Christian poets Juvenus, Prudentius and Ausonius"[4].

This meant that their influence became strong on the continent of Europe when such learning was in decline because of the collapse of the Roman Empire.

From about the beginning of the seventh century the Irish monks were a very important cultural and religious influence. They played a significant part in "the integration of classical learning and a higher standard of education into the organization of the Christian Church"[5]. Eventually in the ninth century they numbered among themselves formidable figures of European scholarship, such as John Scotus

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[1] DAWKINS, R., 'Is Science a Religion?' in The Humanist Magazine, vol. 57, no. 1, 1997.
[2] MURRAY, D., 'Religion and the Secular in Contemporary Ireland', in *Tracking the Tiger,* Veritas 2008, p. 61.
[3] RYAN, J., *Irish Monasticism, Origins and Early Development*, Dublin & Cork 1931, p, 376.
[4] *Irish Monasticism*, p. 381.
[5] Ó FIAICH, T., in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity,* ed. Mackey, J., Edinburgh 1989, p. 118.

Eriugena, probably the most prominent theologian and philosopher of his day and Sedulius Scotus, a scholar and versatile poet[6] who wrote a treatise, *De Rectoribus Christianis*, which was the first in a literary genre addressing the question of how rulers ought to govern and the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal in civil society[7].

Some of the Irish monks who travelled to continental Europe were people of high learning, "scholars and poets, philosophers and biblical commentators, geographers and cosmographers, grammarians and philologists and lexicographers". Cardinal Ó Fiaich added that:

> "They liked to show off their learning, to parade their knowledge of Greek (which was sometimes fairly elementary), to indulge in fanciful speculation, to take part in loud unending disputations"[8].

In short they might have felt very much at home in a modern university!

The Irish presence also spread to German speaking parts of Europe, in dialogue with another new language and culture, through people like Kilian of Wurzburg and Virgil (or Fergal) of Salzburg. The Irish monastery of Regensburg (founded mid eleventh century) became the mother-house of several foundations which became known as *Schottenklöster*. Some of these had fine libraries and schools. Two rectors of the University of Vienna came from the Irish monastery in that city.

The Schottenklöster began to move from Irish hands in the fifteenth century but, as a result of the Reformation, more than thirty Irish Colleges were established in Paris Nantes, Salamanca, Rome, Seville and Tournai and so on[9]. For the most part, these lasted for about a century and a half.

In a certain sense the foundation of Maynooth College and the other seminaries was a continuation of these Colleges whose work could now be done in Ireland. The foundation of Newman's Catholic University in 1854, of St Patrick's College Drumcondra in 1875, of Carysfort College in 1877 and of this College in 1898 continued a tradition of Catholic higher education which has been, in all these various forms, part of the Irish Catholic identity from the beginning.

Irish Catholic higher education has a past to be proud of. A more important question for us concerns its present and its future.

WHAT IS CATHOLIC EDUCATION?

At the beginning of any reflection on this question we have to pose some questions, "What is Catholic Higher Education?" Even more fundamentally, "What is education?" We may begin by saying that education is about the whole person of the student and about preparing students for life, but we immediately hit an obstacle which is very obvious yet often passed over.

We have to ask ourselves, "What is a person? What is life for? How can we be sure that we are doing justice to the whole person?" If we have no answer, how can we say that we are setting out to prepare people for life? But a modern university, or a Government Department of Education, cannot give a satisfying answer to these questions. In our liberal culture the nature of the person and the goal of life are matters that each person is free to decide for him- or herself. Different individuals may believe that a human person is "matter or spirit or both or neither"?[10]

In our world such questions are usually ignored or emptied of their depth:

> "This post-secular climate – in Ireland, as elsewhere – is characterised by an individualistic and privatised approach: religion becomes spirituality, which, in turn, is understood primarily in terms of self-discovery, self-healing, and self-fulfilment, with little or no reference to the wider faith community, or the challenging and critical aspects of the Christian faith"[11].

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[6] Ó FIAICH, art. cit,, pp.120-123.
[7] Turner, William. "Sedulius Scotus." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. New York: 1912. Cf. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13680b.htm.
[8] Ó FIAICH, art. cit., p. 119.
[9] Cf. DUDLEY EDWARDS, R., *An Atlas of Irish History*, Routledge London, 2005[3], pp. 130-131.
[10] Cf. SHEED, F., *Society and Sanity,* Sheed & Ward, London 1953, p. 4.
[11] VAN NIEUWENHOVE, R., "The 'Sophisti-fication' of Religion – a theological critique," in *Culture, Technology and Values: Ethical Dimensions of European Identity*" ed. BREEN, M. & CONWAY, E. Centre for Culture Technology and Values, Limerick 2008, p.84., cf WRIGHT, N. T., Lecture to Lambeth Conference, 30 July 2008, cf. http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Lambeth2008.htm section headed, 'The Bible and Gnosticism'.

Catholic education in our times is looked on as something eccentric because it believes that an answer to those questions is the starting point for its educational project. When one thinks about it, however, what is really odd is the idea that you do not require any answer to such questions – or even any serious search for an answer to them – in order to be an educator! This, as Frank Sheed said "is odd beyond all words. Yet it does not strike people as odd. And the depth of our unawareness of its oddness is the measure of the decay of thinking about fundamentals"[12]. Those words, written over half a century ago, have lost none of their relevance!

Although St Thomas Aquinas did not have a formal philosophy of education, it is appropriate in this ICUSTA Conference to consider how our patron saint might cast some light on the nature of higher education for Universities which honour the tradition he has left us.

It is worth noting that, in Aquinas, we find once again the interface between faith and another culture. The Christian tradition of Europe found itself having to deal with the writings of the philosophers of ancient Greece. Greek works, particularly those of Aristotle were becoming available for the first time. Some said they should be used only in a subsidiary way to assist in the study of theology; some wanted to see philosophy as entirely autonomous.

Aquinas saw that there could not be two unrelated or irreconcilable answers to the question of the goal or meaning of human life – what is the good in which human fulfilment can ultimately be found? Our culture apparently sees no difficulty in saying that each person can choose their own answer. More accurately, it does not even see the need for one goal that gives meaning to life. The result is that many people live with a large variety of lesser goals, whose relationship to each other is never clear. These goals are not necessarily evil; people may not go so far as to see them as 'gods', but they become so absorbed in them that they lose sight of the need for overall unity. This is a source of the disintegration that marks our societies. There is no overall purpose by which our priorities can be set. Thus one finds constant calls for leadership in our crises, but a deep resentment of any potential leader who would dare to suggest that there is a goal or vision that everyone ought to share.

In fact, Aquinas believes that there is one ultimate goal or end of human life and that it is the source of every motivation and longing[13]. In everything we do and in every choice we make we are seeking a fulfilment of ourselves which does not lie within ourselves but in the infinite transcendence of God, or as Augustine put it, our hearts are restless until they rest in God[14]. .

This point was repeatedly made Pope Benedict in *Spe Salvi:*

> "The human being needs unconditional love… In this sense it is true that anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life… This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain"[15].

Philosophy has an essential role in addressing such issues and theology also addresses them. These approaches are not the same Theology speaks of areas that are beyond the sphere of the philosopher; philosophy inquires in areas where the philosophical method is the only appropriate one. But the human person, the nature of meaning of whose life is being considered, is the same person.

> "And on all these questions [about human nature and the ends of human life] there is a single truth to be discovered and asserted, and not a truth-from-the-standpoint-of-philosophy asserted by reason and a truth-from-the-standpoint-of-faith… So theologians have to come to terms with philosophical arguments and not just with their conclusions, since they have to be assured both of the soundness of the philosophical arguments and of the consistency of the conclusions with their own interpretations of and deductions from revealed truth… Theologians cannot carry through their own work adequately who do not recognise that what they have to say about divine providence and human affairs, about divine law, human knowledge of it and human rebellion against it, and about redemption and grace can only be made intelligible in terms of an account of human powers, reasoning, will and choice and of the relationship of human beings to their

[12] *Society and Sanity,* p.4.
[13] Cf AQUINAS *Summa Theologiae*, I - II q.1, especially a.6.
[14] Cf. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions, 1.1.1*
[15] BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi,* 26, 27. 31.

ultimate good. But what theology needs in these respects can in large part only be supplied by philosophy".[16].

The outcomes of these inquiries cannot in the end be contradictory. If the philosopher and the theologian arrive at two incompatible accounts of the goal of my life, they cannot both be correct.

If we believe that education is about preparing people for life, then the question of meaning cannot be ignored. To tell students who have faith that there is no place for their faith perspective in the curriculum is equivalent to telling them that this educational effort is not about the whole person; that it is a process to which they may not bring the whole of themselves.

Even more seriously, the idea that an educator can detach him- or herself from even an unspoken view of the meaning of life is illusory. In all education some view of what life is about is being communicated: "Either implicit of explicit reference to the determined attitude to life (*Weltanschauung*) is unavoidable in education because it comes into every decision that is made"[17]

Consider the phrase, 'preparing people for life'. This means different things to different people. Some will say that it is important to prepare students for 'real' life in the 'real' world. On examination, that 'real' world is often defined in narrow terms and with narrow goals such as economic success. The present crisis challenges us to see that there is more to us than that. We are not defined by our role in the economy or our role in the State. The meaning of life, our understanding of who we are, is not to be found in the state or its institutions. That vision is found and grows in families and communities, in contexts where we do not simply 'play a role', but where we belong and are fully ourselves:

> They are where we learn who we are; where we develop sentiments of belonging and obligation; where our lives acquire substantive depth"[18].

Aquinas says that the answer to the question of the purpose of life is the source of all human desire and yearning. Everything we do, we do because of the happiness we have been created and redeemed to share:

> … Every beginning of perfection is ordained to complete perfection which is achieved through the last end… (T)he last end stands in the same relation in moving the inclinations as the first mover in other movements[19].

In a pluralist society where everybody's views are rightly respected, we may be tempted to think that this means excluding issues such as the nature of the human person and the purpose of human life as potentially divisive and treating them as, purely private, "religious" questions. This may seem an enlightened, progressive approach to differences.

Perhaps the opposite is the case. Perhaps the most divisive and alienating approach is to tell people that society can function, and the preparation of people for life can proceed, without any reference to their deepest convictions.. As Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asked in the context of the marginalisation of religion in modern societies, "If things are so good, how come they're so bad?"[20]

Real tolerance does not say, "Believe whatever you like; that is a private matter of no concern to the rest of us." It says that the search for ultimate truth is at the heart of what it means to be human and that a society that does not recognise where the fire of conviction burns within its members has not begun to be tolerant. We cannot be tolerant by minimising the importance of people's convictions; that would actually diminish our understanding of one another.

Socrates said that the unexamined, unreflected life is not worth living. We can live life in the shallows, with nothing of the 'contemplative outlook'[21] described by Pope John Paul, but we never fully escape the question of meaning. William James wrote about the sense of frustration he felt in a holiday camp where all his needs were met. But where were the heights and the depths "the strength and

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[16] MACINTYRE, A., 'Aquinas's Critique of Education' in *Philosophers on Education, ed.* Rorty, A. O., Routledge. London and New York 1998, pp. 98 – 99.
[17] CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Catholic School* (1977), 29.
[18] SACKS, J., *The Persistence of Faith,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1991, p. 66
[19] AQUINAS *Summa Theologiae*, I - II q1, a.6,
[20] *The Persistence of Faith,* p. 31.
[21] JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae,* 83.

strenuousness, intensity and danger"?"[22] Elsewhere he wrote of the importance of living life to the full, with intensity, Even if there were no grounds for believing in God we would postulate one in order to give zest to life as a response to God who is infinitely demanding:

> "Every sort of energy and endurance of courage and capacity for handling life's evils is set free in those who have religious faith"[23]

The wise human being is "one who loves and seeks the truth"[24] . "Objectively speaking, the search for truth and the search for God are one and the same"[25]. That search is prompted in us by "the wonder awakened… by the contemplation of creation"[26]. Education is about awakening wonder and enabling students to follow, that search for the truth about God and about themselves: We have to dismantle the small little hollow identities in which we have sheltered so that we can discover who we are in God"[27]. The goal can be lost to view if we value everything by pragmatic criteria and scientific data:

> "It has happened therefore that reason, rather than voicing the human orientation towards truth, has wilted under the weight of so much knowledge and little by little has lost the capacity to lift its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being"[28].

We get swamped by data with no framework in which to understand it. So, some of the time individuals behave as if affluence were the ultimate purpose of their lives, at other times as though the ultimate end were sport, or their family, or their status in the eyes of others. But it is impossible for a person's will or desire "so to tend to two things, as though each were its perfect good"[29].

What happens in practice is that everything becomes a commodity which has to establish its own claims in virtue of a view of the human good that is shallow and subjected to the interests of the economy or some other 'measurable' goal. Thus, for example, education becomes dominated by the goal of providing skills for the economy, citizens for the state.

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

A Green Paper was published in Ireland in 1992 called *Education for a Changing World*. The Introduction began by speaking of 'The Challenge of Change'. The first item was "The need, particularly in an enterprise culture, to equip students with the ability to think and to solve problems – rather than just with an accumulation of knowledge". It would seem likely that thinking and problem solving that were envisaged were in the area of entrepreneurship and technology!

This has impacted very significantly on higher education in Ireland:

> "The Irish universities, in a relatively short span of time, are now unashamedly market-driven: pragmatic instruments of industry, beholden to the business community, colonised by the need to serve the economy"[30].

Catholic Higher Education, makes a very significant contribution to the well being of society, even in economic terms, through the education of teachers, through the presence of its graduates in many walks of life, through the research of its academics, through the involvement of its colleges in social inclusion and justice and development At the same time Catholic Higher Education has a counter-cultural role in today's Ireland and we cannot be complacent about how we are responding to that challenge.

In the context where many people, not least in academic life, think of religion and theology as 'a cultural lag' the task of claiming a place for theology in academic life and for a Christian ethos in a

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[22] JAMES, W., 'What Makes a Life Significant' in *Essays on Faith and Morals,* Meridian, Cleveland and New York 1962, p. 289.
[23] 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', in *Essays on Faith and Morals,* p. 213.
[24] JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio* [FR], 16 cf. Sir 14: 20-27.
[25] JOHN PAUL II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1991,* II.
[26] FR, 4.
[27] RADCLIFFE, T., *Why Go to Church?,* Continuum, London 2008, p.22.
[28] FR, 5.
[29] *Summa Theologiae,* I – II, q.1 a.5.
[30] LANE, D. A., *Challenges Facing Religious Education in Contemporary Ireland,* Veritas, Dublin 2008, p. 15.

university may be a difficult, but perhaps refreshing, challenge!. "Theologians in the modern university bear the burden of proof, which turns out to be a very good thing for theology…[31],

The purpose of a Catholic University was stated by Pope John Paul, who spent many years, as he put it "deeply enriched by the beneficial experience of university life"

> "Without in any way neglecting the acquisition of useful knowledge, a Catholic University is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of *proclaiming the meaning of truth,* that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished. By means of a kind of universal humanism a Catholic University is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God"[32].

The truth about us and about God is not just information or facts. God is love. Love is not just something God does, it is who God is. It follows, therefore, that, if God is our final end, this cannot be conceived as a thing, a commodity, as something we can acquire or achieve, but only as a gift we receive. This is true even in human relationships of love; the love of another person never a right to be demanded but a gift to be gratefully received. To treat somebody as a means to any end, however good, is to fail to respect, much less to love them. Love for God cannot be based on our self-interest. Our self interest lies in loving God not because he will make us happy for God's own sake,.

This is true of every relationship of love. To 'love' somebody because it is in my own interests is to fail really to love. Only by loving someone for that person's own sake can I enter a genuine loving relationship, Persons are, "the only creatures on earth that God has wanted for their own sake"[33]. This extraordinary statement means that God does not see us as instruments for achieving some goal other than the full flowering in us of the gift of love which is our destiny.

When we say that Catholic education is engaged in a search for this ultimate truth, we are not attempting to impose something alien to our students. If our approach reflects on the human person in his or her wholeness, we may hope that the questions we ask and the vision we try to live in our education will find an echo even in the hearts of those who do not recognise God's love as the source and the goal of everything. God dwells in unapproachable light, even for believers:

> "But if this dark light is indeed named by the name 'Lord', it almost does not matter if the name is not admitted, or even if it is denied, so long as we are possessed by that 'nostalgia' which is the desire for it, that desire of the intellect to know what must altogether transcend our knowing. And that desire comes back to our experience, in our university terms, as that most fundamental, but also that most familiar, of all our responsibilities, which is to intellect's unstoppable questioning, that openness to what lies unreachably beyond it"[34].

The deepest layer of the human being knows that there is an ultimate truth: "that at the beginning of all things, there must be not irrationality, but creative Reason – not blind chance, but freedom"[35].

Even apart from Christian revelation, it has to be recognised that the encounter with the question of God is found in all cultures, in poetry and philosophy and religion. Newman says that "if ever there was a subject of thought which had earned by prescription to be received among the studies of a University… it is this ancient, this far-spreading philosophy"36.

That reflection is more than just acquiring information about God. Christian theology is about the truth that makes us free, that opens us to the gift of love which is the only source of our ultimate good. "The purpose of knowing what is true is to know the good… The truth makes us good and the good is true: this is the optimism that shapes Christian faith"[37].

The Catholic University, while recognising the autonomy of individual areas of study, knows that they all come together at another level. They all must have reference to the good of the human person and

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[31] HAUERWAS, S., *The State of the University*, Blackwell, Malden MA 2007, p. 94.
[32] JOHN PAUL II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 2, 4.
[33] VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.
[34] TURNER, D., *Faith Seeking,* SCM Press, London 2002, p. 135.
[35] BENEDICT XVI, *Address at Collège des Bernardins,* Paris 12 September 2008
[36] NEWMAN, J. H., *The Idea of a University,* Longman, London 1907, p. 69:. http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/
[37] BENEDICT XVI, *Address prepared for delivery a 'La Sapienza',* 17 January 2008.

of the human community, considered not just in a partial way, but in terms of their overall meaning. That meaning is a gift not an achievement. It is beyond our power to achieve; we cannot even accept it unless God enables us to do so. Pragmatism, economic benefit, successful competition with one's rivals cannot be what is ultimate in individual life, in social life or in education. The temptations to put possessions, power and prestige in the place of God were rejected by Jesus in the desert. That rejection is still a fundamental element in the path towards our good. These things have their value but they are not what life is about. These lesser goals can exercise a powerful influence, but none of them can be the overall good to which our lives tend. That temptation in the desert will always be present. In a world where it is particularly strong and prevalent, the Catholic University has a vital role as a counter cultural challenge.

What would a university which saw itself as seeking the overall truth, the overall good, of the human person, look like – in particular a university that sees that good in terms of Catholic faith? It would be a community in which the search for the truth and the good of the people who make it up, and of the human race, is pursued rigorously and professionally through the study of individual subjects. In that pursuit it would possess "that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively" and it would guarantee its members "academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good"[38].

But it would also possess an ethos which would permeate everything. This was how Pope John Paul described it to the students of the *Institut Catholique* in Paris:

> The Catholic ambience that you need goes well beyond a simple 'environment'. It includes the will to form oneself to have a Christian outlook on the world, a way of grasping reality and also of understanding your studies, however diverse they may be. I am speaking here, as you well understand, of a perspective which surpasses the limits and methods of particular sciences to arrive at the understanding that you ought to have of yourselves, of your role in society, of the meaning of your lives"[39].

This is not a threat to other subjects and their autonomy, nor a recipe for saying that every other faculty and department must defer to theology and be judged by theology or by Church teaching. It is saying rather that every subject, including theology, must be judged by whether it is at the service of the ultimate good of the persons involved and of human persons in general. Theology and philosophy have the task of posing those questions, not least to themselves. The fundamental driving force of human seeking, of human freedom, cannot be excluded from the preparation of people for life. That is why theology and the rest of the University need one another. Pope John Paul said this very clearly in relation to theology and science. They need one another if they are to be true to themselves:

> "Only a dynamic relationship between theology and science can reveal those limits which support the integrity of either discipline, so that theology does not profess a pseudo-science and science does not become an unconscious theology. Our knowledge of each other can lead us to be more authentically ourselves. No one can read the history of the past century and not realize that crisis is upon us both. The uses of science have on more than one occasion proved massively destructive, and the reflections on religion have too often been sterile. We need each other to be what we must be, what we are called to be" [40].

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In looking to the future of Catholic Higher Education in Ireland we face many challenges, some examples of which I will briefly outline. I suspect that the same questions arise in other countries too.

A. We need to understand our ethos

Why do we need Catholic Colleges of Higher Education? Would it not be preferable that theology should be studied in secular universities and third-level colleges, together with a good chaplaincy service and pastoral care?

This is not an 'either-or'. It is obviously desirable that theology should be in the mainstream, and to a limited, but welcome, extent it is. However, the ethos of a College consists in a great deal more than the study of theology or a good chaplaincy service. The Second Vatican Council said that it is "the

[38] *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 12
[39] JOHN PAUL II, *Address at the Institut Catholique,* Paris, I June 1980.
[40] JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Director of the Vatican Observatory*, 1 June 1988.

special function of the catholic school to develop in the school community an atmosphere animated by a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel"[41].

The State is a structure by which the community organises itself to do particular limited functions. There is a tendency for the modern State constantly to extend its reach and to grow careless about its proper limits. But there is more to human life than being a citizen. Education belongs primarily to the community rather than to the State[42].

The 'ethos' of a school or college is not easily expressed in legal terms. What would be the legal definition of "a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel"? The ethos of a Catholic college derives from its being an organic part of a community of faith. That faith is not something to be imposed – which would be a contradiction in terms; faith must be a free act. It offers a vision of the greater meaning and the greater hope which is the context of all knowledge and of all life. It offers the challenge of educating pupils in the whole of who they are.

To place the future of third level education for Catholics entirely in the context of the secular university would, I fear, be to underestimate the pressure that modern university culture would exercise to deprive theology of its essential nature. In a modern liberal university theology is expected to conform to the general pattern of other subjects:

> "My contention is that religious studies in England adopted secular methodologies (positivist theory and neutral enquiry) as a key to the study of religion, contesting that it, not theology, was the proper subject to be embodied in the emerging modern university"[43].

It is not an exaggeration to say that such 'religious studies', deprives theology of its essential nature. It becomes a theology without faith, without worship, without a believing community. In other words, it is not theology at all:

> "Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders itself to God: it is in this way that it becomes possible to see how it is still *God* that is being spoken of, that which makes the human world a moral unity. Speaking of God is speaking to *God* and opening our speech to God's…'"[44].

The slide from theology to religious studies in this reduced sense is a slide away from theology. It is, therefore, a departure from a higher education that can be called Catholic or that can do justice to the faith of Catholic students. What is happening here is something that is also occurring in other disciplines, driven by the need to be useful and productive, to contribute to the well being of society considered in terms of economics, influence and prestige (once again the temptations in the desert!)

What the process comes down to is that education now seeks to focus on the solving of problems rather than the opening of the mind and heart to mystery. Gabriel Marcel made what he called the 'central distinction' between problem and mystery:

> "The problem is something which one meets, which blocks the road. It is entirely in front of me [*devant moi*]. On the contrary, the mystery is something with which I find myself engaged, the essence of which is consequently not to be entirely in front of me.[45]

When religion is studied as an object, this is no doubt a valid study, as is, for instance, the study of the human being in terms of his or her chemical composition. But if one were to imagine that such a study would yield any great insight into the mystery of the meaning of human life, it would be an illusion. To study Dante as literature and not at all see it as theology would miss the author's meaning.

When that reduction to the merely objective and the suppression of the mystery happens, this comprehensively distorts the nature of religion. And it distorts our own humanity:

> "It is man himself who ends up being reduced, for the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the

[41] VATICAN II, *Gravissimum Educationis,* 8.
[42] The Irish Constitution sees the State not as *providing* but as *providing for* primary education 42.4
[43] D'COSTA, G., *Theology in the Public Square*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005, p. 20.
[44] WILLIAMS, R., *New Blackfriars 72*, 1991, p 144
[45] MARCEL, G., *Essai de Philosophie Concrète,* [original title *Du Refus á l'Invocation,* 1940) Gallimard, Paris 1967, pp. 107-8 (my trans,).

purview of collective reason as defined by "science" and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective"[46].

What is happening in academic establishments is that the room for reflection on mystery is diminishing and the objectification of education is increasing. Another way of saying this is that education is being seen as a commodity rather than the personal and social enrichment of persons.

This does not distort theology alone. How can one study literature, or history, or the human sciences without reflection on the mystery that is death and evil and betrayal and the mystery that is love and heroism? How can one study art or science without encountering the mystery of beauty and discovery and without being in awe of the mystery of the universe? Can anyone doubt the impoverishment that must result from depriving students – and staff – of the possibility of reflecting on that mystery, which is also the mystery of themselves, in the light of their own religious faith?

This process has not been confined to secular universities. The decline from involvement with a faith community and the consequent decline into increasingly weak and inadequate articulation of the nature of Christian colleges have been meticulously documented by Burtchaell. He concludes his analysis in language that may be harsh but is not unfounded:

"Rational discourse in the contemporary academy believes – or says – that it can abide no prior convictions, commitments or loyalties. But Christian scholars, to be at home in this kind of academy need not actually forswear their faith. All they must do is agree to criticize the church by the norms of the academy, and to judge the Gospel by the culture. And most of them have burned that incense when bidden"[47]

Catholic colleges, therefore, need to understand that their ethos is an approach to education which is distinctive because it is carried out in the light of the final end, the ultimate good.

B. We need to articulate our ethos.

The ethos of a Catholic college it is not just about structures or institutions. Nevertheless it is important to articulate what it means. Many Catholic colleges do so in Mission Statements, with varying degrees of success. The temptation, not always fully resisted, is to formulate them in terms that would not be out of place in a secular university. The desire to do this is very understandable since the educational and political orthodoxies of today do not understand any other language.

It is well to remember the perceptive insight of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In the modern pluralist world, we need to be bilingual. We need to speak to those who do not share our beliefs, or see their relevance, but we need also to know the native language of our families and communities in which our convictions were formed[48]. Without such a language of conviction underlying what we say, we will be speaking a language without depth, in which the mystery is never spoken of.

The great difficulty about trying to promote an artificial language like Esperanto is that, at least for its first few centuries, it will be a language without a literature, without a culture, in which no communities and civilisations have led their lives. We must not try to conduct the dialogues of our modern societies in such a language, empty of any tradition of reflection on the heights and depths, the tragedies and hopes of human life.

In speaking of the ethos of our colleges only in neutral secular language we risk passing from what may seem to be a strong statement that "this is a Catholic College" to a list of resulting undertakings, such as a commitment to the integral development of the students, to recognition of the equal dignity of all, to social inclusion, to ecological responsibility, to the development, to cultural diversity and so on. All this is admirable. These commitments do indeed flow from the Catholic ethos; a college that lacked such commitments could not justifiably call itself Catholic.

But something is missing. *Why* does the Catholic ethos demand such commitments and *how* is the attitude to and the fulfilment of these commitments affected by the fact that this is a Catholic College? How many of these commitments could equally well be endorsed by colleges with no religious tradition or ethos?

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[46] BENEDICT XVI, *Address at the University of Regensburg,* 12 September 2006.
[47] BURTCHAELL, J., *The Dying of the Light,* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 850
[48] Cf. *The Persistence of Faith,* p. 66ff.

Such statements can be useful but they need to provoke deeper reflection. We need to see how our ethos is founded on faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise we risk forgetting our foundations, just as our societies and their education systems are eroding the foundations on which they stand and exiling the question of meaning to a peripheral, private place.

In people of faith the fire that fuels those commitments is a vision of the shared destiny of all human beings in Christ. We are on a journey whose destination is described by St Thomas Aquinas:

> "Then, too, in everlasting life is the full and perfect satisfying of every desire; for there every blessed soul will have to overflowing what he hoped for and desired… it is evident that their desires will be abundantly filled, and their glory will exceed their hopes…
>
> Since each one will possess all good together with the blessed, and they will love one another as themselves, and they will rejoice in the others' good as their own. It will also happen that, as the pleasure and enjoyment of one increases, so will it be for all"[49].

This vision of a final destiny in which we will be enriched by understanding and celebrating every human gift as if it were our own challenges every narrowness, counters every despair, and answers every human longing beyond all expectation. If we could articulate such a vision and live by it, the life of our colleges would contradict every prejudice which regards the word Catholic as a synonym for restrictiveness and short-sightedness.

C. We need to speak to the wider world

This may all seem somewhat abstract and far from the practical issues of our times. Reflection on Christian faith does not of itself produce expertise in economics or politics or science or commerce or international trade.

But it does reflect on the context in which all of those questions arise. Every civilisation is founded on an approach to the mystery of life: Who are we? Why is there suffering? What happens after death? At the heart of every culture, every society lie these questions:

> "Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence"[50].

I give just two examples of the importance of this foundation and the contribution that believers and in particular Catholic universities can make to the practical issues of the day. The first is the Social Doctrine of the Church

a) That social teaching is founded on precisely the questions I have been addressing, on the same foundation as Catholic education – the vision of the human person in the light of our destiny in Christ; "The whole of the Church's social doctrine, in fact, develops from the principle that affirms the inviolable dignity of the human person"[51]

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church presents that teaching on the basic principles of social doctrine and on many individual issues from biotechnology to war, from the environment to development. It is very insistent that all of this flows from a theological vision:

> "*This doctrine has its own profound unity, which flows from Faith in a whole and complete salvation, from Hope in a fullness of justice, and from love which makes all mankind truly brothers and sisters in Christ*: it is the expression of God's love for the world, which he loved so much that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16)[52]

In a world where workers are at the mercy of decisions made thousands of miles away for reasons of which they were never aware until their jobs are axed, there is need for a voice that articulates some principles other than those of profit. That means recognising the personal dignity and worth of employees and obligations to the wider community[53].

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[49] AQUINAS, *Collationes super Credo in Deum* 12.
[50] JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus,* 24.
[51] PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [CSDC], 107
[52] CSDC, 3 (italics in the original).
[53] Cf. CSDC 338 – 342.

On a local, practical level, we recall the damage done to this region by the closure of the Shannon Heathrow route – now partially restored. The Bishops, Catholic and Church of Ireland, of the region around Shannon Airport pointed out, among other issues that:

> "The ultimate purpose of the economy and of economic activity is not just to create profit; it is to make life more human for people. There is no area of life, including the economy, in which social responsibility may be ignored. Nor do we accept that shareholders should be presumed to have no interest other than the generation of profit at whatever cost to their fellow human beings"[54].

The final sentence has even more relevance today! Wealth and power must not be put in the place of God, nor valued above people, or they become idols which cannot offer what people seek in them:

> "The one who builds on sand builds only on visible and tangible things, on success, on career, on money. Apparently these are the true realities. But all this one day will pass away. We can see this now with the fall of large banks: this money disappears, it is nothing"[55].

In all of this the role of the Church is not to seek to replace politics or economics or to claim expertise in these areas. It is to present the vision of the human person and human solidarity, and the belief in a loving God which motivate commitment and purify us of the distortions of selfishness, pride, greed, prejudice, or to put it in one word, sin. It is "to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run"[56].

b) Another example of what higher education inspired by a true vision of the person, has to contribute to society lies in the moral confusion of our day. As with education, so with morality, it is necessary to begin with some understanding of the human person and the purpose of human life.

The prevailing moral philosophy is, not surprisingly, in harmony with the prevailing educational philosophy – pragmatic, focussed on productivity. To give it its proper name it is Utilitarian. It evaluates our choices and decisions in terms of their results. A good choice is one that produces happiness, a bad choice produces pain. Moral judgement consists in weighing up the pleasure and pain produced by various possible lines of action.

The origins of this approach lie in an understandable, but mistaken, response to the growth in scientific knowledge. By comparison with the demonstrable, useful results of scientific research, ethical discussions seemed vague. The attempt to 'raise' moral discourse to the level of scientific proofs ignored Aristotle's warning that at it is the mark of an educated person "to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits"[57].

There are clear weaknesses in the Utilitarian approach, such as the difficulty, or rather impossibility, of comparing different kinds of pleasure and different kinds of pain. The fundamental flaw, however, is to believe that the weighing up of the consequences of our choices is an adequate way of evaluating the exercise of human freedom. This is a particular example of the danger indicated by Pope Benedict at the University of Regensburg that it is the human person who is diminished when we view everything through a the lens of a scientific approach.

When we understand freedom more fully, we understand that there is more to our choices than the consequences they produce. Human freedom is a language in which we speak to one another and either acknowledge one another as equal in dignity, or fail to do so. Human freedom chooses not just among possible lines of action, but is also a choice about myself. I am freely deciding what kind of person I am and will be – I shape and form myself.

When we understand with St Thomas that every human longing is a longing for our final destiny, we see that our choices are also a response to the gift of love which is our ultimate good. When he wrote his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor,* Pope John Paul began his reflection from the question of the rich young man: "What good deed must I do *to possess eternal life*?" (Mt 19:16)[58] And so, the Pope spoke of human freedom:

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[54] Joint Statement of the Bishops of the Mid West Region 11 August 2007.
[55] BENEDICT XVI, Address at the Synod of Bishops, 12 October 2oo8.
[56] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est,* 29.
[57] ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I.1.3.
[58] JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis Splendor,* 6.

> "It has been rightly pointed out that freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action; it is also, within that choice, a *decision about oneself* and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God"[59].

The relativism that gives rise to the moral confusion of our day amounts to what he called an "overthrowing and downfall of moral values", He went on to say that ""the problem is not so much one of ignorance of Christian ethics," but ignorance "rather of the meaning, foundations and criteria of the moral attitude"[60]. This downfall arises from an inadequate understanding of human freedom.

A Catholic college needs to begin with a vision of the human person that understands that significance of our freedom as going beyond the mere production of changes and consequences in the world. Nobody should be in any doubt that making this perspective heard in the moral confusion of our day will not be easy. But we should at least be confident in presenting an approach to human freedom and to moral reflection that responds to the real dignity of the person,

D. We need to work together.

The situation in Ireland is that the Catholic Colleges which remain need urgently to deepen their bonds with one another. In most cases the remaining colleges are linked to a much bigger civil university. They now form a diminishing proportion of third level education in Ireland. That makes a counter cultural attitude to the market driven approach difficult. It would be a tragedy not just for our colleges but for Ireland, if the tradition that marked Irish education from the beginning, marrying secular learning with the riches of the Christian tradition, were to become an empty shell.

Catholic colleges need to find new ways of relating and cooperating. We need to work together on what it means to be a Catholic college, not apologising for what we are, but believing that our perspective has enormous importance for a culture that finds it hard to address the big questions, but is sorely in need of the 'great hope' which 'can only be God'.

On areas such as the articulation and living of our ethos and on the place of theology in our colleges, we need, in spite of the hiccups which are unavoidable in academic politics, to take every opportunity for dialogue and cooperation and mutual support.

Of course, it is not only the tradition of *Irish* Catholic higher education that needs to be fostered and to find expression in our world. The tradition that underlies most of the great historical universities in Europe and throughout the world is a tradition of faith. The University of Oxford has as its motto "*Dominus Illuminatio Mea"* (Ps 27:1) Denys Turner says "I suppose we should call it nowadays its 'mission statement'?"[61]

Our motto in Mary Immaculate expresses the same idea: *Briathar Dé mo Lóchrann; The Word of God is a light for my path"* (Ps 119: 105). The logo of the College includes the torch of learning and its centenary history is titled *Passing on the Torch*[62]*.*

Many of us could no doubt profitably return to our college mottos to measure of our fidelity to our ethos. Many colleges of St Thomas may have the Dominican motto *Veritas*, as indeed this college had for half a century. The Truth who is the light of the world illuminates all that we do and learn, but, more importantly, illuminates *us* and sets us free.

ICUSTA performs an important role in strengthening the bonds among Catholic Universities around the world. We need to increase the contacts among Catholic colleges and to build on our conviction that what we stand for is not irrelevant but offers a light in which the deepest meaning of human life may be seen, a light which is at the heart of the rich educational tradition we have inherited.

The task for our generation is to ensure that the light does not die. If it does, it will darken not just the Catholic dimension of university education but university education itself. Burtchaell warns that if Catholic colleges do not keep the light burning, "They will fail…to notice the intellectuals who are in thrall, not free; argument that is not rational, judgments that have become dogmas roughly enforced"[63]. This will be an impoverishment of the secular academy itself. The church was and can continue to be the context for serious academic work that can help shed light on the deep questions.

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[59] *Veritatis Splendor,* 65.
[60] JOHN PAUL II *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 18
[61] *Faith Seeking,* p. 128.
[62] O'CONNOR, Sr L., *Passing on the Torch,* Mary Immaculate College Limerick 1998.
[63] *The Dying of the Light,* p. 851

It is appropriate to leave the last word to Father Eamonn Conway, Professor of Theology in this college. He is speaking about theology, but what he says also applies to what a Catholic University should be:

> "Essentially what is needed is a healing of the imagination, a liberation of human desire; perhaps even a restoration of confidence that it is safe to fall in love with life itself; a process of teaching us to trust that a robust and coherent sense of identity can emerge from and be formed in more solid ground than merely that based on what I have and own,..
> Above all, students would need to be provided with an experience of Christian discipleship whereby the distinctively Christian vision of what it is to be human would sink deep into their hearts and minds, so much so that they would not only be able very quickly to recognise the defragmenting and dehumanising effects of contemporary culture, but also be able to resist it in terms of their personal lifestyles"[64].

+Donal Murray
Bishop of Limerick

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[64] CONWAY, E., 'The Commodification of Religion and the Challenges for Theology' in *ET Bulletin 2006/1:* http://www.cctv.mic.ul.ie/publications/folder3/CommodificationETBulletin2006.pdf